



Critique d'art

Actualité internationale de la littérature critique sur l'art contemporain

43 | Automne 2014
CRITIQUE D'ART 43

Beyond Archives. Translating, Today, the Photographic Image in Southern Africa

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/15328>

DOI: 10.4000/critiquedart.15328

ISBN: 2265-9404

ISSN: 2265-9404

Publisher

Groupeement d'intérêt scientifique (GIS) Archives de la critique d'art

Printed version

Date of publication: 15 November 2014

ISBN: 1246-8258

ISSN: 1246-8258

Electronic reference

Katja Gentric, « *Beyond Archives. Translating, Today, the Photographic Image in Southern Africa* », *Critique d'art* [Online], 43 | Automne 2014, Online since 15 November 2015, connection on 20 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/15328> ; DOI : 10.4000/critiquedart.15328

This text was automatically generated on 20 April 2019.

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Beyond Archives. Translating, Today, the Photographic Image in Southern Africa

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REFERENCES

Rise and Fall of Apartheid: Photography and the Bureaucracy of Everyday Life, New York: International Center of Photography : DelMonico Books : Prestel, 2013. Sous la dir. de Rory Bestor, Okwui Enwezor

Distance and Desire: Encounters with the African Archive: African Photography from the Walther Collection, Göttingen : Steidl ; New York : The Walther Collection, 2013. Sous la dir. de Tamar Garb

- 1 Three coincidences entitle us to establish a precarious link between these two books read in tandem. The photographs they address come from an identical geographical region, the countries of southern Africa. What is at issue here is a contemporary re-reading of archival images, developed in two catalogues of exhibitions initially held in New York in 2012. That is where the similarities end.
- 2 As its title indicates, *Distance and Desire: Encounters with the African Archive. African Photography from the Walther Collection* presents a private collection,¹ that of the banker Artur Walther focused on works by contemporary artists and photographic archives. The dozen contributions to the catalogue are the outcome of a symposium organized at New York University in November 2012, and re-construct encounters between international researchers and specialists. Bringing together regions which are nowadays part of Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana, Zimbabwe and Botswana, the collection² is in this case presented from the viewpoint of South Africa. The first part of the photos selected dates from the early days of the history of photography and overlaps

with colonial expansion in Africa. A lengthy parenthesis in the chronological sequence of images juxtaposes them with contemporary photography. Tamar Garb, the exhibition curator, proposes questioning the archive as a source of pictures, conventions and attitudes which can be endlessly manipulated and altered.³ While the exhibition includes almost no images from the years 1948-1994, the works of contemporary artists enter into a dialogue with the archives of the early 20th century and bridge a gap spanning half a century nevertheless lying at the heart of their concern.

- 3 The photographs compiled in *Rise and Fall of Apartheid: Photography and the Bureaucracy of Everyday Life* are dovetailed like so many pieces of a jigsaw puzzle missing from this parenthesis. They cover the period from 1948 to 1994: 1948 referring to the victory of D.F. Malan's National Party, and 1994 to the country's first democratic elections—almost fifty years later—when Nelson Mandela became president of the Republic of South Africa. The authors of the ten studies in the catalogue (for the most part South African) highlight an astonishing reciprocity between the establishment of the Apartheid State and the photographic image observing and/or defying it. The photographic approaches and methods oscillate between journalism and social documentary. These images are playing an essential part in the construction of the South African nation of today. Organized in a chronological manner, the catalogue proposes historical friezes reminding us of the most important dates: “1948-1959”, “1960-1969”, “1970-1979”, “1980-1989”, and “1990-1995”.
- 4 These remarks on the fact that the time-spans covered by the two catalogues do not overlap are not meant to suggest that these are incomplete studies, with lacunae, or flagrant omissions, but that, quite to the contrary, they are specialized texts, informed by a shrewdly chosen theoretical viewpoint. The scientific directors of these two volumes (Tamar Garb/Awam Amkpa for *Distance and Desire* and the twosome Okwui Enwezor/Rory Bester for *Rise and Fall*) have published complementary studies elsewhere. They form part of a bibliography which has not only been ceaselessly enriched since 1994, but which has also found a readership in the international community of researchers.
- 5 Any debate about photographic practices in Africa is tributary of the approaches and methods of the first explorers and ethnologists who went to Africa out of curiosity⁴ to “discover” the various tribes and peoples, who seemed exotic to their eyes. The two catalogues, each in their own way, conjure up the importance of the series of *Bantu Tribes of South Africa* produced by Alfred Martin Duggan-Cronin,⁵ published between 1938 and 1954. Within the theoretical line of *Visual Studies*, these images can be analysed for the normative gaze which they apply to their subjects. The deformations introduced by the ethnologist-cum-photographer are commented upon by the researchers. In the context of a debate focused on the issue of the rise of Apartheid, these same images actively stereotype people according to typologies used to justify the categorization of the indigenous populace and, in the end of the day, a racist and segregationist ideology. Tamar Garb's introductory essay (pp. 24-25), in the book which she has edited, is, for its part, a plea to get beyond the binary categories of post-colonial studies. Garb highlights the importance of taking into consideration the complexity of the knowledge about and the conditions of production of these early 20th century photographs. The purpose is to reveal clues which might indicate whether or not the photographic subject had any choice with regard to the conditions in which he is depicted: is he thus partly an “author” of this photograph? Or, on the contrary, was the photographer seeking a presentation confirming his preconceived ideologies?

- 6 Unlike ethnographic and normative photographic custom, the work of Santu Mofokeng (born in 1956) opens up a breach, inverts roles, and comes up with a counter-archive.⁶ The latter collects photographs from the early 20th century. The black families the represent have themselves commissioned these images. From 1997 onwards, Santu Mofokeng presented the series in the form of a slide show titled *The Black Photo Album/Look at me: 1980-1950*.⁷ Among the 35 pictures collected, he slips in some 50 slides with black backgrounds, inscribed with information about the people depicted, quotations taken from political discourses betraying the orator's racist ideology, and questions about the status of these pictures, written by Santu Mofokeng himself. Santu Mofokeng is also a member of the Afrapix collective.⁸ He is the author of in-depth photographic reportages about certain aspects of society in the Apartheid days. Eight of his pictures, taken from the series *Johannesburg-Soweto Line* (1986), feature in the *Rise and Fall* show⁹, where they offer an opportunity to evoke the absurd displacements which were the lot of black workers. The documentation of the consequences of the Bantustan system has been undertaken with similar subtlety by David Goldblatt in the reportage titled *The Transported of KwaNdebele*.¹⁰ Santu Mofokeng's "train church" adds a spiritual dimension to the notion of displacement. He creates images which are deeply poetic, reflecting that which pertains to the invisible.
- 7 The mirror-like eye between the exhibitions is confirmed and specified in the choices of the works of those photographers who, like Santu Mofokeng and David Goldblatt, feature in the two books: Guy Tillim, Zwelethu Mthathwa, Sabelo Mlaneni, Jo Radcliffe, Jodi Bieber and Sue Williamson. Their approaches and methods are turn by turn questioned for their research as portraitists (cf. *Distance and Desire*) and for the relevance of their socio-political commentary (cf. *Rise and Fall*). The conclusion of this binary reading might have been the essay by Khwezi Gule about what he calls "trauma tourism".¹¹ Khwezi Gule warns of the danger of maintaining places of memory by wanting to resurrect the memory of heroic acts among a public thirsty for commercialized suffering. This has been avoided because these exhibitions have also offered an opportunity to look for ways to get beyond simplistic, simplifying discourse. Three notions turn out to be useful here: intimacy, translation, and the gap between visibility and absence of image.
- 8 The complex and nuanced essay by Colin Richards, "Retouching Apartheid: Intimacy, Interiority and Photography" (*Rise and Fall*, pp. 234-247) analyses a series of images, developing the notions of intimacy and interiority, as announced in the title of this contribution. The text culminates in a precarious balance between promiscuity in these photographs, the spectacular aspect they flirt with, and the intimacy of violence: an unlikely and terrifying truth about a state of emergency like the one in South African society where nothing can be taken for granted in the daily round. Into the intimate gives rise to a disarming internalization. Apartheid is nothing if not an accumulation of private moments, intimately suffered, imposed and experienced.
- 9 So Apartheid engendered a form of solipsism which forces each individual to be led back to himself. The void to be crossed, in an operation of trans-cultural translation which is probably the sole exit, links the matter of subjectivity to the use of language. A collective of young artists based in Johannesburg, which is making a name for itself as The Center for Historical Reenactments (CHR)¹² or the Non-Non collective, is actively looking for historical moments which put the finger on the ambiguity between fiction and alleged truth. In 2012, the CHR proposed re-using a protest banner, famous because of a photograph taken by Alfred Kumalo in Uitenhage in 1985, during a demonstration

marking the 25th anniversary of the Sharpeville massacre. On the banner you could read: “They will never kill us all”.¹³ The 1985 demonstration gave rise to new excesses on the part of the police, during which 25 people lost their lives. To evoke the massacre of 21 March 1960, the members of the CHR reproduced, in March 2012, the banner of 21 March 1985, asserting that history is nothing if it is not experienced and if it does not foreshadow the future.

- ¹⁰ In both publications, is to be found the notion of a void to be crossed, missing pieces, a reversal of gaze and reflection, and a gap between visibility and absence of image. The censorship of the media under Apartheid enabled the state to ban a text, a song, a play—the censorship board duly imposed a ban on broadcasting the image of Nelson Mandela. Because this latter happened to be in prison, it was possible to apply the ban to the letter, with the last pictures taken of Nelson Mandela dating back to before his incarceration¹⁴ in 1962. Other iconic images, like the one of Hector Pieterse dying in the arms of his friend Mbuyisa Makhubo, taken by Sam Nzima on 16 June 1976, have come to the attention of an international audience because the photographers dispatched them abroad as quickly as they could—in South Africa, they were only very rarely seen. Whatever the case may be, the quintessence of Apartheid and the private loneliness it would give rise to are not visible in demonstrations, but they take place in moments of family intimacy, behind drawn curtains and during clandestine meetings. While making use of the photographic tool, artists such as Santu Mofokeng, Ernest Cole or Cedric Nunn learnt how to translate everything that is not visible in the image.
- ¹¹ After New York, these two shows were put on in Germany.¹⁵ In June 2014, *Rise and Fall* ended its fourth public presentation at the MuseuMAfricA in Johannesburg this time. The venue compels recognition of the urgent need to finally have access to these photos. In this context the exhibition provokes a great variety of reactions regarding its success and its shortcomings. Let us conclude with a remark made by the activist and photographer Omar Badsha during a round table held at the MuseuMAfricA by David Gooldblatt and Neelika Jayawardene on 3 July 2014. After stirring up many ripples around the controversy about who would have the right to recount the history of others, Omar Badsha admitted: “This conversation is a good one, we should have more of them.”

NOTES

1. The exhibition was held in the Walther Collection Project Space and has since been installed in the Walther Collection buildings at Neu Ulm in Germany.
2. It is part of a three-exhibition cycle, the first having taken place in 2010.
3. Garb, Tamar. “Encountering the African Archive: The Intervoven Temporalities of *Distance and Desire*”, *Distance and Desire: Encounters with the African Archive: African Photography from the Walther Collection*, Göttingen : Steidl ; New York : The Walther Collection, 2013, p. 29
4. Edwards, Elizabeth. “Looking at Photographs: Between Contemplation, Curiosity, and Gaze”, *Distance and Desire: Encounters with the African Archive: African Photography from the Walther Collection*, *Op. cit.*, p. 48-54

5. Godby, Michael. "Change without Changing: The Ethnography of A.M. Duggan-Conin's *Bantu Tribes of South Africa*", *Ibid.*, p. 97-111 ; and by the same author: "Native Studies", *Rise and Fall of Apartheid: Photography and the Bureaucracy of Everyday Life*, New York : International Center of Photography: DelMonico Books : Prestel, 2013, p. 46-65
6. Bajorek, Jennifer. "Then and now: Santu Mofokeng's Black Photo Album", *Ibid.*, p. 217-227
7. The series was purchased for the Walther Collection. It is the hub of the exhibition *Distance and Desire*.
8. Cf. *Rise and Fall of Apartheid: Photography and the Bureaucracy of Everyday Life*, *Op. cit.*, p. 372
9. *Ibid.*, p. 388-391
10. *Ibid.*, p. 410-413
11. Gule, Khwezi. "Bureaucratization of Memory", *Rise and Fall of Apartheid*, *Op. cit.*, p. 534-539
12. See the text by Gabi Ngcobo "I am not who you think I'm not", *Distance and Desire*, *op.cit.*, pp.237-240
13. *Rise and Fall of Apartheid*, *op.cit.*, pp.528-529
14. Enwezor, Okwui. "Preface and Acknowledgments", *Rise and Fall of Apartheid*, *Op. cit.*, p. 21
15. At Neu-Ulm for the Walther Collection and in Munich at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt for *Rise and Fall*.